

# To Be Real

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**growing up mixed in the racial battlefield of boston, i** yearned for something just out of my reach—an “authentic” identity to make me real. Everyone but me, it seemed at the time, fit into a neat cultural box, had a label to call their own. Being the daughter of both feminist and integrationist movements, a white socialist mother and a black intellectual father, it seemed that everyone and everything had come together for my conception, only to break apart in time for my birth. I was left with only questions. To Be or Not to Be: black, Negro, African-American, feminist, femme, mulatto, quadroon, lesbian, straight, bisexual, lipstick, butch bottom, femme top,

vegetarian, carnivore? These potential identities led me into the maze of American identity politics, and hopefully out the other side.

When I was eleven years old, an awkward child with knobby knees and a perpetually flat chest, I was preoccupied with questions of womanhood and what kind of woman I would become. Even then, I was aware of two kinds of power I could access as a female. There was the kind of power women got from being sexually desired, and the kind women got from being sexually invisible—that is, the power in attracting men and the power in being free of men. I also noticed that women fought one another for the first kind and came together for the second. Even as a child, I knew people craved power. I just wasn't sure which kind I wanted.

I liked the power of looking pretty, but wasn't certain men were worth attracting. I didn't like the effect they had on the women around me. Like most of my friends, I lived in a female-headed household. My mother raised us with the help of other women, a series of sidekick moms who moved in and out of our lives. In the evenings, we all converged in the kitchen, an orange-painted room on the second floor of our house. In the kitchen, laughter, food, and talk formed a safe space of women and children. On those occasions when men did enter the picture—for dinner parties or coffee—the fun of wild, unabashed laughter and fluid gossip seemed to float out the window. In walked huge, serious, booming creatures who quickly became the focus of attention. The energy of the room shifted from the finely choreographed dance of womentalk, where everyone participated in but no one dominated the conversation, to a room made up of margins and centers. The relative kindness of men didn't change the dynamic of their presence. From my perspective, it appeared that they immediately be-



came the center of the kitchen, while the women were transformed into fluttering, doting frames around them. The women who had a moment before seemed strong, impenetrable heroines, became, in the presence of men, soft and powerless girls.

My confusion about which kind of power I wanted to have—which kind of woman I wanted to be—is reflected in a diary entry from that year. In round, flowery script I wrote vows. “Always wear lipstick. Never get married.” The prospect of being able to turn heads, to be asked out on dates—to be desired—was an aspect of my impending adolescence which looked thrilling. Lipstick became the symbol of this power in my mind. At the same time, I noticed that once Lipstick Women had attracted men, often they became old and beaten, pathetic, desperate creatures, while the men remained virile and energized. At ten, I hoped there was a space in between the two extremes—a place where I could have both kinds of power—a place where I could wear lipstick and still be free.

My mother and her friends seemed to have settled for only one of these forms of power—the power of feminism—and their brazen rejection of the “lipstick world” insulted and embarrassed my burgeoning adolescent consciousness. I remember one dusky evening in particular, when a group of women from the local food cooperative came banging on our door. They wanted my mother’s support in a march protesting violence against women. She liked these tough, working-class women and what they stood for, so while other mothers called their kids into dinner, ours dragged us into the streets. My sister, brother, and I were mortified as we ran alongside the march, giggling and pointing at the marching women chanting “Women Unite—Take Back the Night!” The throngs were letting it all hang out: their breasts hung low, their leg hair grew

wild, their thighs were wide in their faded blue jeans. Some of them donned Earth shoes and T-shirts with slogans like "A Woman Needs a Man Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle." They weren't in the least bit ashamed. But I was. I remember thinking, "I will never let myself look like that."

Shortly after the march, I began to tease my mother. "Why can't you be a *real* mother?" I asked. It became a running joke between us. She'd say, "Look, a real mother!" pointing at prim women in matching clothes and frosted lipstick at the shopping mall. We'd laugh together, but there was a serious side to it all. I wanted my sixties mother to grow up, to stop protesting and acting out—to be "normal." I loved her, but at the same time craved conformity. In my mind, real mothers wore crisp floral dresses and diamond engagement rings; my mother wore blue jeans and a Russian wedding ring given to her from a high-school boyfriend. (She had lost the ring my father gave to her.) Real mothers got married in white frills before a church; my mother wed my father in a silver lamé mini-dress which she later donated to us kids for Barbie doll clothes. Real mothers painted their nails and colored their hair; my mother used henna. And while real mothers polished the house with lemon-scented Pledge, our house had dog hair stuck to everything.

My mother scolded me, saying I wanted her to be more "bourgeois." Bourgeois or not, to me, *real* equaled what I saw on television and in the movies, whether it was the sensible blond Carol Brady or the Stephen Spielberg suburban landscape—a world so utterly normal that the surreal could occur within it. At night, visions of white picket fences and mothers in housedresses danced in my head. I dreamed of station wagons, golden retrievers, and brief-case-toting fathers who came home at five o'clock to the smell of meat loaf wafting from the kitchen. But *real* was something I could never achieve with my



white socialist mother, my black intellectual father who visited on Sundays, and our spotted mongrel from the dog pound, because most of all, real was a white girl—and that was something I could never, ever be.

★

I was fourteen when I first sat perched on a kitchen stool and allowed a friend to put an iron to my head—a curling iron, that is. She wasn't pressing my hair straight. Just the opposite. She was trying to give my straight, chestnut-brown hair some curl, and I wasn't taking no for an answer. So far, I had been mistaken for almost everything—Italian, Greek, Jewish, Pakistani—but never for black. My features and hair brought me forever short of Negritude. In a 1980s twist on the classic tragic mulatta, I was determined to pass as black. And if that wasn't possible, at least with my hair-sprayed “crunchy curls” I could pass as Puerto Rican. I remember lying in bed at night and smelling Spanish cooking from the apartment downstairs; I would close my eyes and fantasize that I was actually Puerto Rican, that everything else had been just a bad dream, that my name was Yolanda Rivera, and that I lived in the barrio.

I had dropped my quest for a “real mother” and yearned for something within my reach: a real ethnicity, something other than the half-caste purgatory to which I had been condemned. Now I yearned for Blackness, which, like femininity, was defined by the visible signifiers of the times. In my father's era, these had been a daishiki, an Afro, a fisted pik. No longer. This was still Boston in the 1980s and to be authentically black meant something quite different. Now you had to wear processed hair and Puma sneakers. I remember gazing at my best friend's straightened black hair, at the sheen of the chemicals and the way it never moved, and thinking it was the most

beautiful hair I had ever seen. I believed the answer to that ubiquitous question "How can I be down?" lay in cultural artifacts: a Louis Vuitton purse, a Kangol, a stolen Ralph Lauren parka.

On my first day of high school, I went decked out in two-toned jeans, Adidas sneakers, and a red bomber with a fur-lined collar. My hair was frozen in hard curls all over my head and I wore frosty pink lipstick. I snapped my bubblegum and trailed after my sister. She is a year older than me and like most firstborn children, had inherited what I saw as the riches: kinky hair and visible blackness. We sauntered into the cafeteria where everyone hung out before class began. Doug E. Fresh beats boomed from someone's radio. Old friends greeted my sister with hugs; she introduced me and, to my relief, everyone smiled and commented on how much we looked alike. A dark-skinned boy with a shaved-bald head asked my sister where she had been hiding me, and I blushed and glanced away from his steady brown-eyed stare. There, across the cafeteria, my gaze fell on a girl, and we stared at each other with that intensity that could only mean love or hate.

She looked a little like me, but right away I knew she was more authentic than I would ever be. With an olive complexion, loose dark curls, and sad brown eyes, she sat in a cluster of pretty brown-skinned girls. She was smoking and squinting at me from across the hazy cafeteria.

I whispered to my sister: "Who's that girl?"

"That's Sophia."

Sophia whispered something just then to the girls at her table and they giggled. My cheeks began to burn.

I nudged my sister. "Why's she staring at me?"



"Cause David, her boyfriend, has been eyeing you ever since you came in here."

The bald-headed boy—David—winked at me when our eyes met and I heard my sister's voice beside me warn: "Just keep your distance and it'll be okay."

It wasn't. As the year progressed, the tension between me and Sophia escalated. It was as if we took one look at each other and said, "There ain't room in this school for both of us." From her point of view, I threatened her position not only with David, who had a fetish for light-almost-white girls, but also her position in the school. She, like me, had gotten used to her role as "the only one." Her "whiteness" had brought her status within the black world, and she didn't want that threatened by anyone, and certainly not by me with my crunchy-curls.

In a strange way I idolized Sophia, though I would have never admitted it at the time. To me, she was a role model, something to aspire to. She represented what I had spent my whole life searching for: she was the genuine article. While I lived with my white mother in a rambling brown-shingled house, Sophia lived with her black mother in an inner-city townhouse. While my curls were painstakingly acquired, Sophia's were natural. While I was soft, Sophia was hard-core. And of course, while I was the tragedy trying to walk-the-walk and talk-the-talk, Sophia didn't need to try.

David became our battleground. I told my friends and family that I was in love with him and that I despised Sophia. The truth is that Sophia was the real object of my desire. I wanted to be her. But it was just dawning on me that certain things could not be manufactured. By curling my hair, wearing heavy gold hoop earrings, and a bomber jacket, I could not recreate her experience. My imitation of her life could only go

skin deep. So my desire for her was transformed into an obsessive envy. If I couldn't be her, I would beat her.

One day I discovered obscenities about me splattered on the girls' room wall—just the regular catty slander, nothing too creative, saying I was a bitch and a ho. But there was a particular violence to the way it had been written, in thick red marker around the bathroom mirrors. In tears, I went to find my big sister. Always my protector, she dragged me to the girls' room after lunch period to set things straight with Sophia once and for all. We found her in there with her girls, skipping class and preening in front of a mirror.

Sister: "Did you write this about my sister?"

Sophia: "She been trying to get with my man all year. That bitch had it comin' to her."

Sister: "I asked you a question. Did you write this about my sister?"

Sophia: "Yeah, I did. And what are you gonna do about it?"

Soon, in the bright spring sunshine, my sister and Sophia came to blows while I stood on the sidelines with the rest of the black population of our school. I had been warned by Sophia's rather hefty cousin that if I jumped in the fight, she would whip my ass. I didn't jump in. And after all was said and done, my sister ended up with a broken nose, Sophia with two black eyes and a scratched up face. The war was over and I got out without a scar. My sister had protected me, and I knew I was a coward, a fake. And as I sat holding my sister's hand in the hospital waiting room, I knew it wasn't blackness I had failed in. It was sisterhood.

By the time I got to college, in 1988, the mythology of the 1960s had made a comeback. The era loomed in my imagina-



tion as a sort of renaissance of free love, black power, and feminist empowerment. I had developed a *political consciousness* that recognized the evils of the Revlon Three-Minute-Relaxer and the bourgeois slave mentality of the modern housewife. I no longer thirsted for ghettocentric credentials or a mother who baked cookies on weekday afternoons. I had become a full-fledged, button-wearing, fist-waving activist. The climax of this phase came toward the end of my freshman year, when I was arrested and charged with trespassing. Along with fifty other students, I had barricaded myself into the university president's office building for eight hours with a list of demands for full-time ethnic studies faculty. It was an exhilarating and ultimately successful act, and one I don't regret.

But as I was being dragged out of the building in handcuffs, I had a flash of *déjà vu*, the uncanny feeling that I had experienced something like this before. Then, as I stepped on to the back of the police bus and stared at the rows of sweaty, grimy-faced "radicals," I realized that in fact the whole protest had seemed simply a cheap imitation of the 1960s protests I had seen and heard so much about, not only in war stories from my parents, but also on television and in the movies. It was a crude imitation of my parents' life experience. While our protest was about actual issues, we had recycled the language and tactics of another era, leaving the whole event with a NutraSweet aftertaste—close, but not quite the real thing.

My collegiate quest to prove myself as a radical, in the image of my parent's generation, was in fact an extension of the same old dilemma I faced as a child when I promised myself that I would always wear lipstick but never get married. Once again, I found myself falling within the borderlines of identities, forever consigned to the Never-Never Land of the Mulatto Nation. How could I be black but look so white? How

could I be a feminist but continue to wear lipstick and shave my legs? How could I feel attracted to men as well as to women?

To escape from these dreaded multiplicity blues, I had once again constructed a "real" image of myself. As a "radical Afrikan" I took over school buildings and, ironically, developed a fierce disgust for miscegenation. Given my origins, it might seem odd that interracial couples got under my skin. But my parents had split up somewhere between the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies. The dream of interracial loving was over, and I, the progeny of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, found myself repulsed and disdainful of interracial couples—and in particular, of black men dating white women. My friends and I would hiss vicious assumptions at the sight of a black man with a white woman:

"She wants to fuck her way into the black experience. He wants to fuck his way out."

Whenever I was dissing Jungle Feverettes with my fellow black nationalist buddies, I was always careful not to mention my own trail of white boyfriends. Lucky for me, I had burned all the evidence—the "Squeeze" albums, the love letters S.W.A.K.ed from Oregon, the prom pictures of me and that guy from Israel. . . .

Born into a world where racial and gender boundaries were nebulous, my friends and I sought to construct authenticity where there was none. Into this vacuum, we recovered the language of our Golden Age, the 1960s, appropriating its vocabulary for our world, when in fact it didn't quite apply. Back in the 1960s, enemies and friends seemed more clearly defined, whether they actually were or not. To be black or female



generally placed one outside of the power structure. To call oneself a feminist meant something inherently transgressive. No longer. As a generation, in our music and in our politics, we continue to talk of black and female empowerment, with the assumption that certain cultural signifiers, certain catch phrases, have meaning and resonance—though the fact is that they no longer do.

The outmoded belief in the sanctity of blackness and the goodness of women was unmistakable in the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings. Thomas came to be viewed by some (both black and white, liberal and conservative) as a black martyr, another “brother” lynched by the system, because of his physical “blackness” and his oft-told tale of rising up from poverty—in other words, his “authentic Negro experience.” These cultural signifiers camouflaged the fact of his actual beliefs and policies, which have always been diametrically opposed to traditional “black resistance politics.” Anita Hill, on the other side of the coin, became touted as a “feminist martyr” when in fact she had been consistently allied with the right wing, traditionally anti-feminist movement. The fact that she was a woman critiquing Thomas for sexual harassment catapulted her to feminist icon status. Furthermore, the fact that she is black made it okay for white feminists to lambaste Thomas without any of the liberal discomfort they might otherwise have felt in charging a black man with a sex crime. Both groups—those who supported Thomas because of his blackness and those who supported Hill because of her femaleness—were basing their support on a biological given rather than an ideological and actual affinity.

I recently saw an advertisement for a hair dye that depicted a smiling thirty-something woman with shining auburn hair. Under her face were the words, “We put up with our



husbands. We put up with our mother-in-laws. We shouldn't have to put up with gray hair." This advertisement is representative of an emerging feminism—often referred to as "Power Feminism"—which resembles little more than a new language for free-market individualism. This feminism, if nothing else, reveals the true limitation of identity politics when they don't involve a critique of power imbalance. In mainstream venues from *Newsweek* to *Vogue* to MTV, this "new face of feminism" is being celebrated as an improvement on the rigidity of the 1970s militancy. *Cosmopolitan* calls it "capitalist feminism"; *Esquire* magazine prefers to call it "Do Me Feminism." Glamorous young women are congratulated as having outdone their mothers, on having won women's liberation without breaking a nail.

And unavoidably I feel a certain identification with this "new feminism." It is like a welcome sign to my generation of young women, allowing us to at once differentiate ourselves from our feminist mothers and at the same time achieve mainstream power in our careers and love lives. It allows us the self-righteousness of being political activists without the economic sacrifice or social marginalization that has so often come along with that role. It is a feminism no longer on the defensive, with a fun, playful aesthetic that acknowledges the erotic and narcissistic pleasure women receive from beautifying themselves, a pleasure not to be denied.

This new "power feminism" certainly seems a sexy alternative to the 1970s party-pooing rigidity, where revolution came defined by strict dress codes. It may, in fact, be the resolution of the conflict I felt as a child—the space where I could wear lipstick and be free. But I have to wonder: what exactly has changed to allow feminism to become so fashionable? And the answers I find disturb me more than they comfort me. Cer-



tainly sexism hasn't disappeared. I need only to turn on MTV to see images of women as objects. Violence against women is on the rise in the streets and in the home, and big-budget films like *Single White Female*, *Basic Instinct*, and any number of the *Fatal Attraction* rip-offs reveal a culture of misogyny, racism, and homophobia that is as deep as ever. The beauty industry grows as a multimillion-dollar industry every day, as the race/class divide in America gets wider. So why has feminism suddenly become okay in the eyes of the mainstream?

The obvious answer lies in the fact that the power feminists are not necessarily the same women who were locked out of the power structure in the first place. The power feminism phenomenon represents not a "new school" in feminism, but rather a very old school imbedded in whiteness, privilege, "beauty," and consumerism of which the mainstream media has always been in favor.

In Manhattan, I see playgrounds filled with black and Latino women caring for white children. The white women who employ these nannies are busy working on their careers—"thinking like winners" as Naomi Wolf prescribes. At the news-magazine for which I recently worked, there is almost an equal number of white women and white men in power. In their tailored suits, crimson lips, and stiletto heels, these women smash through the glass ceiling to become top editors on the esteemed twelfth floor of the magazine. They publish article upon article celebrating capitalist-feminism and like true superwomen, have children at home being cared for by West Indian nannies. For the women they employ, power feminism offers few solutions to the problems they face in feeding their children, paying the rent, getting home safely in a dangerous city. As British feminist Susan Watkins writes in *Red Pepper* magazine, "In fact, the 'trickledown' effects of power feminism

are having little impact on the worsening living and working conditions of the majority of women in the U.S." Feminism isn't necessarily on the side of the dispossessed—"real" feminism can also be a cloak for conservatism, consumerism, and even sexism. Without recognition of power in all its different forms, and of the unexpected places power can come from, we are only fooling ourselves.

pass (pas, pas) v. passed, passing, passes. -1. to move on or ahead; proceed. 2. to be accepted as being something one is not. 3. to cease to exist; to die.

—*The American Heritage Dictionary*

It is perhaps because of, not in spite of, the intense confusions of my childhood and adolescence that I have come to embrace feminism in my twenties. Today I no longer yearn for a "real" mother; I can see now that I had one all along. I also no longer believe in a single "authentic Negro experience." I have come to understand that my multiplicity is inherent in my blackness, not opposed to it, and that none of my "identities" are distinct from one another. To be a feminist is to be engaged actively in dismantling all oppressive relationships. To be black is to contain all colors. I can no longer allow these parts of myself to be compartmentalized, for when I do, I pass, and when I pass, I "cease to exist."

A black gay British friend of mine, David, took me to the Gay Pride March in London not too long ago. As we marched with the hordes of uniformed gay white men—cropped hair, tight jeans, white T-shirts—we realized that from a distance this march could have been a white male supremacist march—a



fact which made us acutely uncomfortable. But we were even more uncomfortable when the march finally entered Brixton, London's black neighborhood. There, a Jamaican bystander focused his vitriolic homophobia on David, calling him a "fucking sodomite" and various other names as he threatened him with violence. As we walked, many other black Brixtonian bystanders focused on David in their hatred, paying little attention to the white gay marchers around us. David's sameness as another black person made him more offensive to them, not less, and the white men who made up the majority of the march were protected in some strange way by their "alien-ness" to the community at large.

Who were our allies and who were our political enemies at this moment? Were we more identified with the working-class black community who threw insults and threatened violence, or with the middle-class gay white male community that gawked at the blacks with fear and loathing? Was David "more black" or "more gay" at that moment? Of course he was both and much more. But what really mattered was that we walked safely back to his flat in Brixton, through the confusion and violence of the world around us, together.

Back at his flat, David and I spoke of our feelings of alienation from both communities. David suggested that in our post-modern condition we should no longer speak in terms of "men and women," "blacks and whites," "gay and straight," but rather in terms of "powerful" and "powerless," positions which are themselves in a constant state of flux and can become obscured if we are not vigilant. Any of us, despite our biological traits, can hold and abuse power at any one moment. As my mother says, "Whoever can, will."

In this way, it is not my "half-breed" lipstick-carrying feminist muddle that is too complicated, but identity politics which

are too simplistic, stuck in the realm of the body, not the realm of belief and action. I have become suspicious of kente cloth and womyn symbols, the sale and mass consumption of cultural artifacts. My yearning to be real has led me in circles, to red herrings called identity, those visible signifiers of liberation that can be bought and sold as easily as any other object. Breaking free of identity politics has not resulted in political apathy, but rather it has given me an awareness of the complexity and ambiguity of the world we have inherited—and the very real power relations we must transform.